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ABSTRACT

A unit to remediate and teach critical thinking skills was designed and implemented for a class of 24 average ninth graders in a small public high school. The unit's aims were to make available teaching materials and strategies using the mass media as a vehicle, thus providing readily available resources and tools to aid in the teaching of five basic skills. There are currently no set, state-adopted materials designed to facilitate the teaching of these skills. The unit utilized three forms of mass media--magazines, newspapers, television--to serve as teaching aids for teaching critical thinking skills: drawing conclusions, determining stated main idea, recognizing implied main idea, differentiating fact from opinion, and understanding cause and effect relationships. The results showed improvement in four of the above five skills addressed. The fifth skill went unaffected. Two skills were drastically improved. (An appendix of data is attached.) (Author/RS)

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USING THE MASS MEDIA TO TEACH CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

BY

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A Practicum Report

Submitted to the faculty of the Center for the Advancement of Education of Nova University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science.

January 1986

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APPENDIX A: (Table Comparing Pre and Post Test Results)

ABSTRACT

Using the Media to Teach Critical Thinking to High School Students.
Sykes-Bewley, Sussanne, 1986: Practicum Report, Nova University, Center for the Advancement of Education
Descriptors: Basic Skills/Literacy Education/Multimedia Instruction/Education Media/Mass Media Advertising/ Nonprint Media/Press Opinion/ Television DE/ Advertising DE/ Minimum Competencies Secondary Education

A unit to remediate and teach critical thinking skills was designed and implemented to a class of twenty-four (24) average ninth graders in a small public high school. The unit's aims were to make available teaching materials and strategies using the mass media as a vehicle; thus, providing readily available resources and tools to aid in the teaching of five basic skills. There are currently no designed state-adopted materials to facilitate the teaching of these skills.

The unit utilized three forms of mass media--magazines, newspapers, television--to serve as teaching aids for teaching critical thinking skills: drawing conclusions, stated main idea, implied main idea, fact vs opinion, and cause and effect relationships. The results showed improvement in four of the above five skills addressed. The fifth skill went uneffected. Two skills were drastically improved.

CHAPTER I

PURPOSE

Based on this researcher's eleven years of experience in secondary education, it has been observed both in the classroom, and with the support of statistical data, that students' performance in the area of critical thinking skills shows vast weakness.

This author has found significant evidence to support the theory that today's students are lacking basic critical thinking skills because they get very little practice or cause to utilize them. In our ever-present Age of Technology, young people are content to let the media dictate how and what to think. "The average eighteen year old has spent somewhere between 20,000 and 25,000 hours sitting in front of a television set, more than twice the time spent in a classroom" (Burmester, 1984, p. 104).

Discovering that fact, it was the intention of this writer to use the media as a valid teaching instrument, particularly for the instruction of critical thinking skills tested on the SSAT test.

The target group for this study was an average level ninth grade English class containing twenty-four (24) students. These students were chosen from a small-town high school with an enrollment of 815 students, grades nine through twelve. Socially and economically, the student population represents a cross section of middle-class America, with a small Hispanic enrollment of three percent, and a Black population of about nine percent.

The target group scored relatively low on the SSAT test in the areas dealing with critical thinking skills. In the area of identifying stated main idea, they scored a 63%, only slightly higher than the school average of 61% and the county-wide average of 60%. In the area of implied main idea, the target group scored 63%, which was much lower than the school's average of 75% and the county-wide average of 72%. The inference skill of drawing conclusions had a low school average of 73%, whereas, the county average was 79% and the target group tested at an 83%. In the area of differentiating between fact and opinion, the county-wide score was 68%, the school average score was 69% and the target group's score was 79%.

This practicum was designed to methodically address the problem of remediating and/or improving these skills: implied main idea, stated main idea, differentiating between fact and opinion, and drawing conclusions. These above skills are designated to be fundamental to critical thinking. The mass media was the tool for teaching these aforementioned skills, thus, not only raising the average score on the SSAT test, but, also giving students the knowledge to clearly sort, analyze and recognize information which will enable them to become better consumers and critical thinkers long after they leave the classroom.

Since television is such a prominent influence on our youth, this author feels a strong responsibility to incorporate it into the educational curriculum as a vehicle for teaching, and to hopefully combat the ever increasing problem of "media idiocy" in our society.

A post test modeled after the SSAT test taken in September was administered to the target group. It was designed to evaluate achievement in the four specified skill areas after a ten week unit addressing these skills was implemented. The targeted objectives aimed at were:

1. Target students will increase their ability to recognize the implied main idea in a given selection by 20% as measured by the SSAT test.

2. Target students will increase their ability to identify the stated main idea in a given selection by 20% as measured by the SSAT test.

3. Target students will increase their ability to differentiate between fact and opinion by 10% as measured by the SSAT test.

4. Target students will increase their ability to draw valid conclusions by 5% as measured by the SSAT test.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH

The teaching of critical thinking and decision making skills is one of the focal points of the secondary school English teacher. There is no easy, set state curriculum designed to facilitate this undertaking, only a list of exit level skills for the teacher to use as a guide or target point.

There are several diverse definitions of "critical thinking", but, none so succinctly defined as by Shurter and Pierce in their book, Critical Thinking, Its Expression and Argument. They defined critical thinking as "recognizing obstacles to straight thinking such as: prejudices, fixed habits of thought, rationalization and various appeals to self-interests" (Shurter & Pierce, 1966, p. 6).

"How can schools help students to develop the critical thinking skills that will enable them to grapple with, analyze, synthesize and make valid and effective use of the mass of information that threatens to overwhelm?" (Cortes & Richardson, 1983, p. 715). This writer answers that posed question with the opinion that unless educators address this issue directly, our future voters and consumers will be faced with making important decisions based largely on biased rhetoric fed to them by advertisers and public relations firms. These media experts will easily be able to sway a public unable to discern true information from distorted opinion.

Edward deBono, in his article, "The Teaching of Thinking as a Skill", states that logic, mathematics and data processing concern themselves not with the perceptual side of thinking; that the traditional teaching approach to critical thinking merely concerns the spotting of faults; that discussion as a means of teaching thinking involves little transfer of thinking skills from one situation to another (deBono, 1983, p. 706). He feels that in terms of perception, learners need to achieve two things: 1) the ability to see things differently (i.e., creative or lateral thinking), and 2) the ability to see things more clearly and broadly (deBono, 1983, p. 705). Mr. deBono's philosophies and techniques have been successfully implemented in the United States, Australia and Venezuela.

Another project which calls for restructuring of the schools to emphasize the development of more rigorous intellectual skills is the PAIDEIA group. The PAIDEIA group urges coaching and discussion whereby the student enlarges his understanding of ideas and concepts (Walsh, 1985, p. 22). Mortimer Adler, the leader of the PAIDEIA group believes that, "through discussion, a teacher can help students think about their thinking in an organized way", and that the focus on student questioning is important. He further states, "Teachers can begin by encouraging students to search out underlying assumptions, guiding reasons, possible implications and

alternate criteria" (Walsh, 1985, p. 24). The PAIDEIA group is also largely responsible for starting a movement to initiate critical thinking skills into the curriculum in California, Connecticut, South Carolina and Wisconsin.

Jerry Brown has designed a program called "Think About" that helps students "learn to reason and solve problems more systematically so that they can function as independent learners" (Brown, 1983, p. 710). "Think About" is a television series that presents viewers with interesting life-related problems and demonstrates creative ways of solving them. Brown believes that, "one of the useful things about lessons that focus on problem-solving is that they blend content and skills from a variety of disciplines. Such lessons also force students to draw on their own general intellectual skills; collecting, organizing, and interpreting information" (Brown, 1983, p. 713). The "Think About" program enabled television and teachers to work together.

> Nancy Thompson, in her article, "Some Ideas On How English Teachers Can Develop an Expertise in Multi-Media", states with some frustration about their task becoming harder and harder. She compares it to "swimming upstream in opposition to a current that sweeps us back into educational techniques devised for a situation that no longer exists. We can't go 'back to basics' because the basics have changed. The new basics do not include reading and writing and speaking, but do in fact, integrate them into a comprehensive communications system (Thompson, 1977, p. 93)."

Miss Thompson feels that teachers must recognize the importance of multi-media and its place in education, as well as use it as a tool for teaching thinking and for learning (Thompson, 1977, p. 92).

Robert Probst feels that, "schools need to find ways of making students more alert to the relationship between reality and symbol, so that they may respond more intellectually to the images presented; because, it is out of those images that they will construct their notions of the way the world operates" (Probst, 1983, p. 87). In order to do this, Probst suggests in his 1983 article in the English Journal, the teacher needs to help students raise questions that will awaken their awareness level to concepts that television so subtly instills and goes often unobserved; and to help students develop the intellectual power necessary to avoid learning inappropriately from television shows. He goes on to say that one way to achieve this goal is through a set of general questions arranged to encourage observation, response and reflection. The student will then avoid the unthinking absorbtion of ideas and attitudes (Probst, 1983, p. 88).

In 1975, a random survey of forty-eight Indiana schools found good evidence that some schools were introducing students to skills needed to become refined analyzers and users of the media. Bernarr Folta was the one who conducted this independent survey. Because of Mr. Folta's belief in the use of media as a tool for interpreting and sharing the world, he was pleased to find in his survey, that

several Indiana schools were in agreement with him and were, in deed, using the media successfully to teach basic thinking skills (Folta, 1978, p. 2).

Lorraine Lewis is one of many educators today who is taking a giant step for education by incorporating media literacy into her curriculum. She states in a 1984 article,

> "Accepting as a given that the center of any English course is the teaching of critical thinking and decision making skills, in today's world it seems obvious that we should teach these skills through media, as well as books. As sacred as the written word will always be, the handwriting is on the wall, or the tube, that audio and visual concepts will make up much of the mass communication of the future (Lewis, 1984, p. 52)."

In his article, "Basic Skills of Television Viewing", Jon Shorr stated, "The purpose of a school's language arts program is to not just teach reading, but to teach children how to communicate effectively in society" (Shorr, 1978, p. 73). He goes on to say that a comprehensive television education program prepares students to cope with television by preparing them with symbols, grammar and techniques of visual communication, by helping them understand the nature of T.V., the medium and the industry, by helping them to develop critical thinking skills (Shorr, 1978, p. 73).

Jeffrey Schrank in his book, Deception Detection, believes that the purpose of classroom study of advertising is to raise the level of awareness about the persuasive techniques used in advertising. He feels that ads can be studied to detect their psycho-

logical hooks, how they are used to gauge values and the hidden desires of the common man. Schrank states, "There are truly basic skills that the schools have neglected, far more basic than the three R's. One of these is visual perception" (Schrank, 1975, p. 3).

Based on this vast wealth of information and research, this educator elected to introduce into the classroom a ten week unit designed to enhance students' critical thinking abilities, which are fundamental to all forms of communication. She integrated four of the state mandated skills as the fulcrum in her project. She used various current media to teach critical thinking skills, specifically; differentiating fact from opinion, drawing conclusions, recognizing implied main idea, and determining stated main idea in a given selection. This was done by having students take a closer, analytical look at advertising both in print and on the television. Students were taught to readily recognize biases and slanted news writing. Students read several samples of letters to the editors both in newspapers and in national news magazines. Students read various reviews of books, movies, and plays. These activities were geared to expose each student to several different opinions and the writer's method of persuasion. The students began to notice the variety of opposing viewpoints that our world encompasses. By exposing students to vast amounts of obvious opinionated writings, they learned to sort out and arrive at clear, analytical thinking processes which they can transfer to

other areas of their life. This writer believes the methods she chose to remediate the basic skills fundamental to critical thinking are both appropriate and practical. By using the vast amount of available media, which is new and different every day, educators can draw from several sources at little or no expense. Virtually every student has access to a television set. Magazines can be brought in from home or donated from doctors' and dentists' offices. Recency is not necessary. It would be very impractical to expect Walter Cronkite or Edward deBono to be available for our classroom, but, their ideas can certainly be implemented and adapted according to each teacher's needs and resources. By using this teacher's solution strategy in full, or in part, every teacher can readily implement a unit or mini-unit using the media to teach basic skills to any level student. This unit does not necessarily need to be practiced only in an English classroom. There is certainly plenty of carry over into the social science or art fields.

This writer further advocates a "hands on" approach to teaching these basic skills. Students can become actively involved in the communication process; the writing, editing, acting, brainstorming, persuasive and manipulative aspects of communication, and the conception of just how important and diversified communication really is takes a concrete meaning in their minds. Education becomes a fact rather than an impossible goal.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The implementation for this unit was primarily a "hands on" approach to discover how to analyze and sort out data searching for fact, opinion, main idea, inference, and to draw conclusions on what they found.

Students were pre-tested in September using the "Reading/ Language Arts Test of Basic Skills". When the results of that test showed weaknesses in the critical thinking areas, this implementor designed her unit to remediate these specific skills using the media as her main tool.

The experimental group was a class of twenty-four average level ninth graders, in a relatively small high school in the Tampa Bay area. The project took ten weeks exactly from introductory lesson to final test.

During the first week the teacher defined terms and familiarized the students with different propaganda techniques. Class discussions carried on for four days, probing the students' thinking as to whether propaganda was always harmful, or never truthful, and shoud we avoid it entirely. Students began to weigh serious points of view. It was interesting to notice how students used some of these very techniques when trying to persuade their peers to their side of the issues.

Nine propaganda techniques were explored in depth:

1. Bandwagon
2. Repetition
3. Transfer
4. Testimonial
5. Exigency
6. Free and Bargaining
7. Glittering Generality
8. Name Calling
9. Miscellaneous Techniques
   a. snap appeal
   b. plain folks appeal

These came from a book entitled, Critical Thinking Book I (Harnadek, 1975, p. 98-132). The last day of the first week, students were asked to write persuasive paragraphs of their own employing each one of these techniques.

During the second week, students began keeping a notebook with samples of each of the nine propaganda techniques lifted from magazines and newspapers. Students spent class time perusing magazines and newspapers for advertisements, editorials, and campaign announcements. Once they found the sample, they put it in their folder and underlined the exact words that exemplified the use of the specific propaganda technique. Some of the samples were very easy to find. Others were more subtle and had to be hunted for in depth.

During the third week, students were asked to write their own text using only pictures as guides. The teacher passed out pictures from magazines. Students had to realize the technique being used visually and write original text utilizing it. This lesson forced

each student to make an inference, thus draw a valid conclusion from a visual perception which took concrete form in their writings.

Also during this week, attention was paid to the use of factual and opinionated messages. Students were asked to circle "fact" words and sentences and underline "opinion" words and sentences in advertising and news copy examples. Then, students were required to use the same kind of ideas in their own writings, again circling and underlining. This exercise allowed students to identify, label, transfer, and create fact in subtle conjunction with opinion.

The fourth week was centered around television viewing skills. Students transferred critical thinking processes in the written genre to a visual and auditory genre. Students keep a television viewing diary for one week exactly. This diary charted viewing times, shows and advertisements watched, subtle persuasion being incorporated, and roles of men and women both in advertising and programming. At the end of their viewing week, students were able to review their diary, and again, draw valid conclusions. thought provoking questions about their diary results were discussed in class. The adveritising industry's use of sex roles, minority groups and violence were closely analyzed. Conclusions were drawn about how the media can and does influence our thoughts and reinforces certain perceptions. During class that week, students

were again searching magazines and newspapers for examples of minority roles, sex roles, and violence roles in advertising or persuasion campaigns.

Week five centered on newspaper editorials of local and national issues. The teacher provided sample copies of pro and con opinions about local issues taken from the newspaper. Students read these in class and compared arguments from both sides. By comparing and contrasting these editorials and letters to the editors, students drew valid conclusions about first, the newspaper's standpoint, and second, the community's standpoint and last, their own leanings. Students were then asked to write "mock" letters to the editor of not only the local newspaper, but, the school newspaper. Students had to turn in two letters, one proponant of an issue, and one contrary. By having to do this, students were forced to view both sides of an issue and support it. Some of the letters were so well written and valid concerns, the teacher actually submitted them to the school newspaper.

The sixth week was spent examining news magazines for slanted journalistic writing. Sample news stories taken from Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report were dittoed and passed out in class to be read and studied. Through class discussion and guidance of the instructor, students began to realize the real meaning of persuasion through careful selection of words and phrasing. Again,

students were to circle the facts and underline opinions. They were amazed to see how much opinion there is in newswriting. These materials were added to thin notebooks.

The seventh week was originally planned to show taped journalistic news shows via VCR in the classroom to analyze editing techniques and slanted presentation of issues. Due to technical difficulties this assignment did not materialize. Partly due to faulty attempts at taping, and partly due to a time element. This instructor still feels this section has valid worth in her project and plans to allow more time and pre-plan for a library of VCR tapings which can be kept and used over and over again. Such shows as "Today", "60 Minutes" and "20/20" were to be watched and discussed, pointing out the stand that the network and reporters obviously took when compiling their stories. Instead, the seventh week was used to write slanted news articles of their own.

The eighth week was designated for this assignment, but the class stepped ahead of themselves and began the seventh week. But, in retrospect, this plan worked well and carried on for two weeks successfully without the students tiring or overdosing on "too" familiar material.

For two weeks, the class wrote original news stories. Class time was used to prepare to write using a pre-writing plan. The teacher gave a broad topic such as "Homecoming". Students were asked to formulate a controversial news story centered around

this topic. They had to first decide which direction they were going, then go through the pre-writing steps to get them. An outline was due first. Then a main idea and topic sentence was formulated. Support for their main idea needed to be organized. The finished product was surprising. The stories were creative, humorous, and highly biased accounts of everything from the homecoming queen turning out to be a boy, to homecoming festivities being cancelled on account of lack of interest. The students spent two weeks utilizing the skills that they had thus far learned. Then news stories showed one-sidedness and subtle sprinkling of fact amongst opinion. Papers were circulated and shared within the class. It was truly a worthwhile two weeks.

The ninth and tenth weeks were spent in group work writing and preparing original commercials using the propaganda techniques, and the mixing of fact and opinion. Students were divided into groups. This was done by selecting a number out of a hat. There were four students in six groups. Again, by random selection, groups were given two propaganda techniques from the nine listed earlier. The groups were to design a 60-second advertisement spot utilizing those techniques. As a group effort, they were to write and re-write this ad. Sentence combining and economy were key issues here. Their scripts had to advertise something (product, person, idea) and persuade the class to buy it. The two assigned techniques had to be obviously incorporated. in the written

script, they had to be underlined and labeled. Once their script was written, they had to role play. I gave three class periods for rehearsal and line memorization and "fine-tuning". Many groups had to go back to the drawing board when they found the script was 120 seconds rather than 60 seconds long! The last three days were spent taping their commericals adhering to the specified time allotment and previewing them in front of class. The students loved seeing themselves on T.V.! They loved realizing the work and honing that goes into a 60 second spot meant to persuade the public. There was a slight element of competition between the six groups to outdo the others. All made for a chaotic, but highly rewarding two weeks. The tape is on file in the school library for future reference.

Throughout the ten week implementation period, the teacher evaluated progress and monitored interest in various ways. Skill sheets were given out in class to reinforce the skills being addressed. Periodic notebook checks were held to see if the required material was being maintained. Supplementary lessons were given to provide for transfer of knowledge. Spelling tests using media and persuasive words were given. Much improvement in the critical thinking skills resulted. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

It was the intention of this writer to show that media can be used as a valid and immediate teaching tool for the teaching of critical thinking and decision making skills which are particularly addressed on the SSAT test.

After a ten week implementation of this project, the results were impressive. Three out of the four skills targeted improved as projected. One skill did not change, and another "side-skill" improved drastically.

The same testing instrument was used for the pre and post test. These were questions taken directly from the "Reading/Language Arts Test of Basic Skills". Each skill was tested individually. The student had to answer correctly three out of four questions to obtain mastery. Most students who mastered the skill got all four questions correct.

In the area of fact and opinion, 83% of the students mastered this skill on the post test, compared to 79% mastery on the pre-test. This is an increase of 4.3%. Not the projected increase of 10% that was aimed for, but an increase nonetheless.

In the area of drawing conclusions, 91% of the students mastered this skill when post tested compared to the 83% mastery on the pre-test, an increase of 8%. The targeted increase in the stated objectives was a 5% increase.

In the area of implied main idea, there was a 28% increase on mastering this skill. Originally on the pre-test only 63% mastered it, whereas, when post tested 91% mastered it. A very significant rise.

However, there was exactly no change in stated main idea. There was 63% mastery on the pre-test and 63% mastery on the post test. This researcher did not cross reference to see if it was the same 63% both times.

A side skill that was suspected to improve although not directly addressed in the outcome statement of the proposal was the skill of cause and effect relationships. When pre-tested, the target group scored 67% mastery, but when post tested there was 96% mastery, a remarkable 29% difference. (Appendix A)

In reflecting on these scores, this writer is pleased that four skills improved, two of which were drastic. Reviewing the one skill that remained unaltered, this implementor sees an incongruity in the results. The students improved by 28% on implied main idea but improved none on stated main idea. Their ability to infer was sharply increased buy what is clearly stated went unnoticed. Particular emphasis in stated material is needed to compensate for this dichotomy.

It should be noted here that after reviewing the post test indepth, and cross-referencing to pinpoint non-mastery in individual students, there was a strong correlation between failure

to do the assignment and inability to pass the skill. There were some students who did not do certain individual worksheets, or homework assignments during the ten week period. When reviewing the grades in the roll book and class participation of various students, it becomes obvious why not all objectives were met. Students who refused to do the "not so fun" assignments can pull down the class average. This is a definite factor in any public school classroom.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the improvement on four of the five skills tested, this researcher feels that her solution strategy was a success. With further attention and some revisions, all five of the objectives could be met. This teacher realizes the emphasis placed on inference rather that statement was the probable factor in the lack of improvement in the skill, stated main idea. Careful consideration and practice in recognizing this in written media would alleviate that weakness.

This writer feels that the objective of 10% - 20% improvement on one skill, unless very low to begin with, is unrealistic. A 5% - 8% increase is more likely. If the teacher focuses in on only one or two skills during a ten week period, he may get a larger increase in mastery. But, looking back this writer recommends a longer time frame when trying to largely increase five skills.

As far as other target groups are concerned, this teacher plans to implement this same unit with the basic level ninth graders. Modifications will be made: first, a longer period of time; second, lower level reading materials when choosing magazines and newspaper articles. Most magazines and newspapers are written on an eighth grade reading level, for basic level classes, materials should be selected on the fourth to fifth grade reading level. Also, something to consider when dealing with low level calsses, is the constant

reinforcement of transfer information. Constant summary of what clipping magazine advertisements has in common with ditto worksheets. The connection must be made frequently for them, or the transfer will not take place.

On the other end, this unit can be stepped up and made more challenging for accelerated or honors classes (perhaps even a gifted class). More advanced reading assignments and even oral speeches could be examined. A president's State of the Union speech could be recorded, having students outline the facts and persuasive techniques spotted. The news commentators' remarks afterward would be excellent pro/con contrasting material.

The main point of the whole project is to show educators how there is a wealth of teaching materials readily accessible for any teacher. With one in-service training session, any teacher can have the training needed to successfully implement all or part of this unit. Each individual teacher could add or subtract various lessons to suit his particular needs.

This unit is not limited to the language arts curriculum. This educator sees the opportunity for the same teaching method to be used in social studies, the gifted program, the SLD program, or the EH program. Critical thinking is a necessary skill fundamental to all disciplines. The media is only a tool to compensate for a lack of teaching materials. The media is accessible and plentiful at any time.

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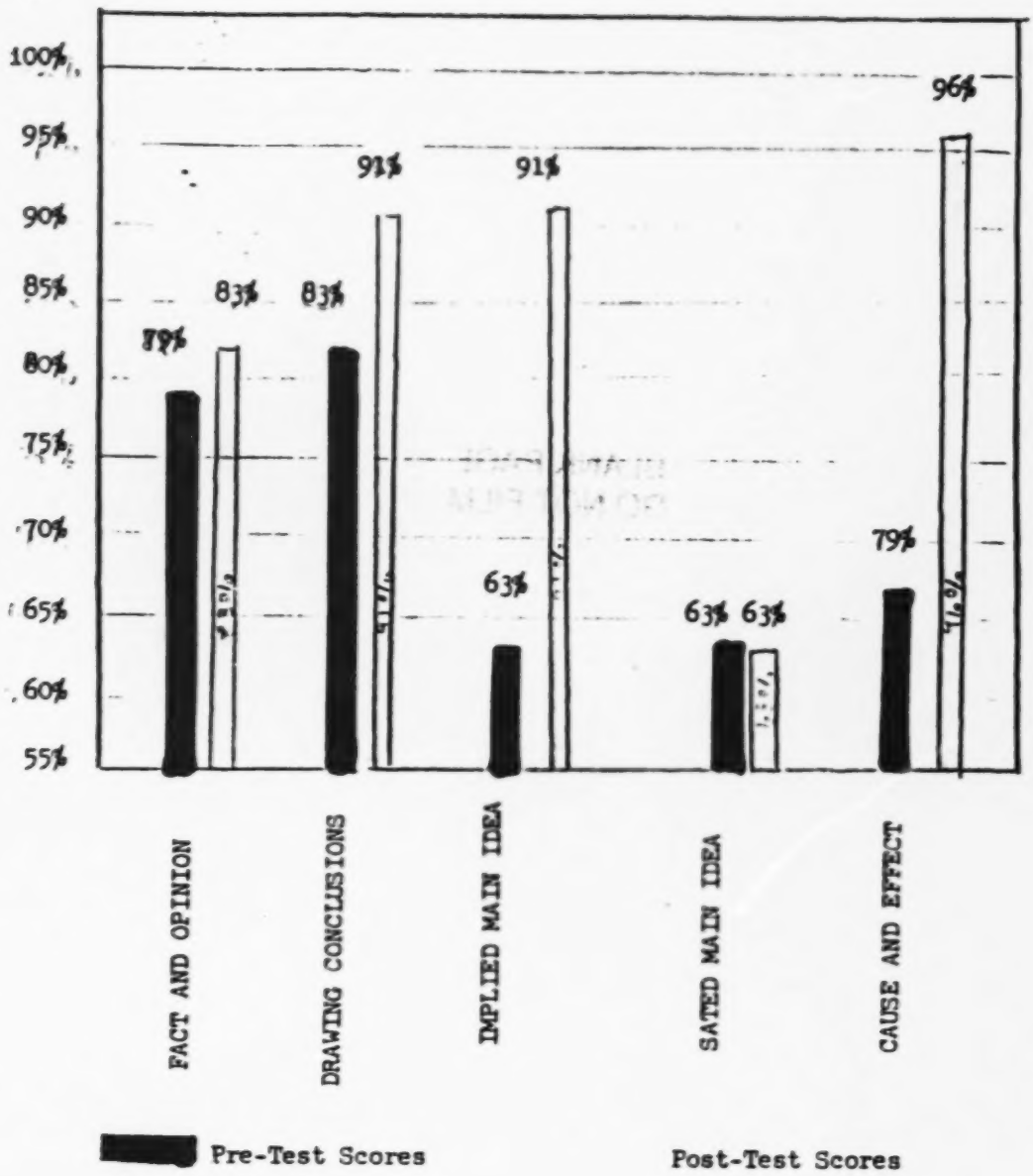
Appendix A

Table Comparing Pre-Test and Post-Test Results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DRAWING CONCLUSIONS
IMPLIED MAIN IDEA
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Post-Test Scores